

Memorial of St. John Vianney
Homily of Bishop John Barres
St. Agnes Cathedral
August 4, 2021

Today we celebrate the Memorial of St. John Vianney, the holy Cure of Ars and the patron of priests.

We pray at this Mass for the holiness of priests throughout the world through the intercession of the holy Cure of Ars and we pray for a rich harvest of vocations to the priesthood on Long Island and throughout the universal Church.

When he was assigned to the parish in Ars, France, the Cure of Ars had been warned that the spiritual life of the parish was at an all time low and that he would face almost insurmountable challenges.

His priestly virtue, holiness and humility conquered the lukewarmness and cynicism of Ars and sent apostolic vibrations through Europe and the rest of the world that last to this day.¹

St. John Vianney's ecstatic and mystical light stirs our hope, stirs our prayer and stirs our missionary spirit.

In an excerpt from the catechetical instructions of Saint John Marie Vianney from the Liturgy of the Hours for his memorial on August 4, the Cure of Ars writes: "Prayer is nothing else but union with God. When one has a heart that is pure and united with God, he is given a kind of serenity and sweetness that makes him ecstatic, a light that surrounds him with marvelous brightness. In this intimate union, God and the soul are fused together like two bits of wax that no one can ever pull apart. This union of God with a tiny creature is a lovely thing. It is a happiness beyond understanding."

Our Holy Father Pope Francis indirectly captures the lessons of the life of the Cure of Ars in section 266 of *Evangelium Gaudium*: "It is impossible to persevere in a

¹ Cf. Bishop John O. Barres' August 4, 2009 Pastoral Letter to the Priests and entire People of God of the Diocese of Allentown, Pennsylvania on "St. John Marie Vianney, the Patron of Priests on the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of his Death and the Year of the Priest proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI."

fervent evangelization unless we are convinced from personal experience that it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to. It is not the same thing to try to build the world with his Gospel as to try to do so by our own lights. We know well that with Jesus life becomes richer and that with him it is easier to find meaning in everything. This is why we evangelize. A true missionary, who never ceases to be a disciple, knows that Jesus walks with him, speaks to him, breathes with him, works with him. He senses Jesus alive with him in the midst of the missionary enterprise. Unless we see him present at the heart of our missionary commitment, our enthusiasm soon wanes and we are no longer sure of what it is that we are handing on; we lack vigor and passion. A person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain and in love, will convince nobody.”

It was St. John Vianney’s rich and ecstatic interior life, his sacrifices and mortification for souls, his intercessory prayer for his parishioners that were the instruments of the Holy Spirit transforming the parish.

From June 19, 2009 until June 29, 2009, the universal Catholic Church simultaneously celebrated the end of the Year of Saint Paul and the beginning of the Year of the Priest with its special focus on St. John Marie Vianney, the patron of all priests.

During this period, I often wondered and prayed about what connection we could make between the life, mysticism and missionary spirit of Saint Paul in the first century and the heroic interior life and pastoral charity of the Cure of Ars in the 19th century.

Then while re-reading Abbe Trochu’s classic biography of the Cure of Ars, I came upon these words: “*Thus for countless souls the road to Ars became the road to Damascus.*” The road to the confessional of the Cure of Ars led many in France to the road to deep and lasting conversion.

The same road exists today in our confessionals.

We are called to make frequent use of the Sacrament of Penance. We are called to encourage others to open the Door of Christ’s Mercy in the Sacrament of Penance.²

² Cf. This section draws on one of Bishop Barres’ homilies during the Year of Mercy while serving as the Bishop of the Diocese of Allentown, PA.

The Sacrament of Penance is liberating and consoling. It strengthens us and gives us a new and fresh start. It leads us to be peacemakers and instruments of the Divine Mercy in our families, our Church, at work, in the neighborhood and in every circumstance.

It is a compassionate and merciful bridge for the wonderful inactive Catholics we meet every day to return to the transforming power of the Catholic Mass and the reception of communion.

A good examination of conscience, a verbal confession of sins with full assurance of the seal of the confession, a priest's counsel and a penance for the reparation of sin, a heartfelt act of contrition lead to our hearing the words of peace and absolution that wash over us and strengthen us: "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Every confessional in our Diocese and around the world is a "Door of Mercy", a Door to Conversion, a Door to the transformation of our minds, hearts, lives, marriages and families, and a Door to the purification and transformation of the Church and the World.

As your Bishop--and fellow penitent--I ask that each of us walk through that Door of Mercy frequently.

Mercy and Mission always go together. With the powerful intercession of the holy Cure of Ars, may we all be missionary disciples of Christ's mercy in the Sacrament of Penance who gently but boldly promote and encourage those around us to enter this unique Door of Mercy, Humility, Repentance and Conversion.

As we enter the Door of Mercy of the confessional, we bring with us our spouse, our children, our extended family and every relationship in our past life, present life and future life. We bring the wounds we may have experienced in these relationships into the confessional and our experience of the Sacrament of Penance. We ask to be forgiven of our sins and we ask for the liberating grace to forgive those who have hurt us or humiliated us.

As we leave the Door of Mercy of the confessional, we rise to a new and resurrected spirit of forgiveness, humility, charity and mercy that leads to deeper grace-filled patterns and conversions in all our relationships.

Speaking to every family and the entire human family in Philadelphia in September 2015, Pope Francis said: "Families transform the world and history."

And the Door of Mercy of the Confessional helps to transform every marriage and family precisely to transform the world and history.

Since the Sacrament of Penance sensitizes us to the transcendent dignity of every human being and helps us to break through selfishness, blind consumerism and global indifference, we bring into the confessional with us every poor and suffering person in every war-torn and violent part of the world as we confess our sins, receive absolution and open ourselves more deeply to be global Good Samaritans.

Thank you for being a Light of Christ's Mercy to your family, your parish, your colleagues at work, our global Church and the World.

St. John Vianney, confessor and missionary disciple of Christ's Mercy in the Sacrament of Penance: intercede for us that a new generation and harvest of holy priests dedicated to the Divine Mercy expressed in the Sacrament of Penance may be raised up.³

³ For further reading and inspiration, Bishop Barres recommends Abbe Francois Trochu's biography, *The Cure d'Ars: St. Jean-Marie-Baptiste Vianney*.